

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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THE CENTRE OF LIFE

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Hosea 11:1-11
Colossians 3:1-11

When my daughter Jennifer was born, I remember looking at Alan's parents, for whom she was a first grandchild and realising that by her coming into the world none of us would be the same again. Alan and I were now parents for ever and his parents had become grandparents, which again is not a status and responsibility which ever goes away once it has bestowed on you.

All of you who are parents – which includes grandparents, know of the joys or parenthood – the delight of watching children grow, of helping them when they need help, of being able to do things for them which make their faces light up. All of you know that there is no sound so precious as that of your child's laughter. And you all know the other side as well. The frustration when they have minds of their own, and when those minds do not see that your age has given you wisdom. The difficulty of convincing your child that something they don't want to do is what has to happen. The sadness when they say or do things which, intentionally or not, really hurt you. Parenting is a joy, but it also a tough job. When I am talking with new parents about the baptismal vows, I always highlight to them that the third and final vow they will take says "Do you promise, depending upon the grace of God, to bring up your child in the truths and duties of the Christian faith." Parents need God's grace to do their job.

And even with God's grace, I doubt you will find many, if any, parents who think that they have done a perfect job. I have yet to meet the parent who is without regrets regarding his or her children and their relationship or their past history together. Kids are so difficult, so annoying, so simply wrong at times, and how are we parents to keep our tempers, to keep on loving?

Hosea had three children and a difficult marriage. At times, when Gomer his wife went off, he would be left as sole parent for his children. Even though they lived in a different culture, there would be times, many times, when one or other, or all three, were frustrating to him. And because he had learned to see his family life as a parable of the life of God with his people, he could see the frustration which God must feel when his people paid no heed to him, or took him for granted, or rebelled against him.

And so he gives us this most beautiful picture of God lamenting over the child who he loved, cared for, fed, and taught to walk, and who has taken the strength, the skill, the confidence which his father had given to him and used it to walk away from home, with, it seems never a backward glance. You wonder where Jesus got the idea for the parable of the prodigal son! And God is sad. And God is angry. And we see God

saying that if that is how his children want it, then that is how it will be, and Israel will be his child no longer.

But that is a sad thought too, and it is hardly good parenting to cut off your child from the family home, from the parental safety net, from the father's love. And God realises that he is angry, yes, but he is also making himself sad. And then God remembers, he is not human: we are made in his image, not the other way round. So he doesn't have to give way to anger. He doesn't have to react as a frail human parent might. He is better than that. He can choose still to love, still to be the good parent.

And so this picture ends with the promise that though God roars like a lion, it is not the roar of a beast about to fall on its prey. It is instead the roar of a lion calling for his cubs, a call with some discipline in it, but above all a call of love. And Hosea knows that in the end God's people will not be able to resist that call of love and no matter where they have gone, physically or in spiritual allegiance, they will come again, and God will return to them.

God will always be the good father. And if there is one thing that is true for all good parents, it is that one way or another your children very much become your life. A tiny bundle of soft humanity is placed into your arms, and for ever after he or she becomes one of the poles round which you're your life will turn. And that is how it is too with God and his children. He will allow his life to revolve around us. It is why he sent Jesus, why he came as one of us, why he allowed himself to die for us, because his children are at the heart of his life.

And Paul tells us that this cuts both ways. He talks to the Colossians about how our lives are hidden with Christ in God. And he talks of Christ being our life. We use that idea about something being our life, to show how important it is to us. We say that climbing, or fishing, or golf, or my family, or my friends, or teaching, or shopping is my life, and we mean that this is what gives meaning, the thing we most want to do or the people we want most to be with. These are things important enough to us for us to allow our lives to revolve around them. You might say that these things or people are the hubs in the wheels of our lives. Without them we would go nowhere, in fact there would be no wheel. We would not know ourselves without them.

Christ is your life, says Paul. If you are a Christian, that is a given. Christ is what is absolutely central to your life. That's not a "should", but an "is". There is a lot of advice Paul gives his readers, advice about how to live as Christians, advice about turning from what is not helpful in keeping Christ central and towards what is. But doing what we are told here is not what makes Christ central, these are things we will want to do to allow Christ, who already is central to be more central still. These are the things we will turn from to give more time and space for Christ, who really matters in our lives.

And so all the things he expects us to turn from are the things that are based on selfishness and self-indulgence – because when you think of it, even anger, malice and abusive language is a form of self-indulgence. We know that these things, like the others named, do not build anyone up, but are designed to establish us as more important than the person we are with. Hosea shows us God turning away from expressing his anger, from the self-indulgence of saying his feelings must be expressed, and must be considered before anyone else's.

And Christ is our life. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God, and we too must turn from the things and attitudes and actions that make us more important than the God who is and holds our life. Just as that tiny baby laid in your arms changes your whole life, so when we first come to know ourselves as children of God, it is the most important thing we can think of and colours everything we do or think. Sadly, as we get used to being God's children, that wonder, that focus sometimes becomes a little tarnished. Like the people of Israel, sometimes without meaning to, we can begin to take God for granted. Like wayward children we can begin to listen to our divine parent less well. We assume, and it is true, that God will always be there for us; and instead of making us grateful and teaching us to live in ways that will please him, it can make us blasé.

Paul knew this well. In his letter to the Romans he quotes people who said that actually the more they did wrong, the more others would see the grace of God as he forgave them. And I have come across that attitude in 21st century Scotland, with someone who said "God has to forgive me, it's his job." What a terrible attitude to a Father who loves you! For if Hosea is showing us how deeply and tenderly and perfectly our divine Father loves us, Paul is showing us how we should respond to that love with all the love we too can muster. We cannot be as perfect as God, but as his children we have taken off the old way of doing and being, the way that looks for our rights, which expects others to do for us, which takes our Father for granted, and we have been clothed in a new life, the life of Christ.

Paul tells us that when we concentrate on this new life, when we allow Christ to be the hub of our lives, then we will find ourselves being renewed in knowledge according to the image of our creator. We are made in God's image, not God in ours, and so that restraint which God decides to practice in relation to his wayward children can not only benefit us, as God calls us endlessly back to his side, but can also be ours to keep us from lashing out at our children, or friends, or at strangers. I was talking to a couple about a wedding last week, and they were still debating one or two details of the service. "Well," said the Groom "She wants this, and I want her to have what she wants." "But," said the Bride, "If he didn't know I wanted this, he would want that, and I want him to have what he wants." I told them their marriage would go well if they were always so restrained about seeking their own way (though as yet I have not heard which way is going to win)! Restraint is one of the least lauded expressions of love. And yet without the restraint of God's love for us, where would we be?

So as we rejoice in the love of God, which shows us perfect parenting, which will not let our childish disobedience distract from the task of loving and caring for us, let us also learn the truth that God came among us and died and rose so that he could be the centre and seat of our lives, the hub around which our lives turn, the one who gives us meaning. And let us ask him to help us learn to be more like him as we practice the restraint of love in all our dealings with him and with the people he has made. Amen.